A Little Catechism on Sedevacantism

By Dominicus - Le sel de la terre N° 79, winter 2011-2012

A first edition of this short catechism appeared in *Le Sel de la terre* 36. This second edition, revised and noticeably enhanced, takes into account the debates and objections raised by the first edition.

Introduction: between Scylla and Charybdis

In the strait of Messina, between Sicily and Italy, there are two formidable reefs: Scylla and Charybdis. It is important, when crossing, to avoid both reefs. Many imprudent or unskilled navigators, wanting to avoid one, were shipwrecked on the other: they fell from Scylla to Charybdis.

Currently, facing the crisis in the Church, there are two errors to avoid: modernism (which, little by little, makes us lose the faith) and sedevacantism (which leans toward schism). If we want to remain Catholic, we must pass between heresy and schism, between Scylla and Charybdis.

In this "Short Catechism", we study one of the two reefs. But the other must not be forgotten. Under pretext of avoiding the dangers of sedevacantism, the dangers of modernism disseminated by the conciliar Church must not be minimized.

The Position of Archbishop Lefebvre

The position that we are going to put forward is that of Archbishop. Lefebvre and that which, at Avrillé, we have always defended. Here is a short summary:

1) Abp. Lefebvre publicly asked himself the question: "We find ourselves truly before an excessively grave dilemma that, I think, has never arisen in the Church. That he who is seated on the Throne of Peter participates in religions of false gods, I do not think that this has ever occurred in the entire history of the Church (Easter 1986). If someone says that the pope is an apostate, a heretic, a schismatic, according to the probable opinion of the theologians (if it were true), the pope would no longer be pope and, consequently, we would be in the "*Sede Vacante*" situation. It is an opinion; I do not say that it cannot have some arguments in its favor" (18-3-1977). "It is not impossible that this hypothesis will one day be confirmed by the Church, for it has some serious arguments. Many indeed are the acts of Paul VI that, accomplished by a bishop or a theologian twenty years ago, would have been condemned as suspect of heresy, favoring heresy" (24-2-1977).

2) However, after reflection, he preferred the opposite solution: "But I do not think that it is the solution that we should take, that we should follow. For the moment, I personally think that it

would be a mistake to follow this hypothesis" (18-3-1977). "But this does not mean, for all that, that I am absolutely sure to be correct in the position that I take; I am placing myself there in a prudential manner. It is rather under this area that I place myself, more than under the theological domain, purely theoretical. I think that God asks us to have clear ideas not only from a purely theoretical and theological viewpoint, but also in practice, when things are very difficult and delicate, and to act with a certain wisdom, a certain prudence that can seem a bit in contradiction with certain principles, not to be of pure logic" (5-10-1978). "As long as I do not have the proof that the pope is not the pope, well, I presume that he is, that he is pope. I do not say that there cannot be arguments that can put one in doubt in certain cases. But one must have the proof that it is not only a doubt, a valid doubt. If the argument is doubtful, we do not have the right to take enormous consequences away from it!" (16-1-1979). "The Priestly Society does not accept [*this*] solution, but, based on the history of the Church and the doctrine of the theologians, thinks that the pope can promote the ruin of the Church by choosing bad collaborators and letting them act, signing decrees that do not use his infallibility, sometimes even by his own admission, and that cause considerable damage to the Church. Nothing is more dangerous for the Church than liberal popes, who are in continual contradiction" (13-9-1982). "In practice, this does not have influence on our practical conduct, because we firmly and courageously reject all that is against the faith, without knowing from whence it comes, without knowing who is guilty" (5-10-1978).

Questions and Answers

What are we talking about?

What is sedevacantism?

Sedevacantism is the opinion of those who think that the most recent popes, since Second Vatican Council, are not true popes. Consequently, the See of Peter is not occupied, which is expressed in Latin by the formula *sede vacante*.

Where does this opinion come from?

This opinion was caused by the very grave crisis which has been occurring in the Church since the last Council, a crisis that Archbishop Lefebvre justly called "*the third world war*."

The main cause of the crisis has been the dereliction of the Roman Pontiffs, who teach or allow to be propagated very serious errors on the subjects of ecumenism, religious liberty, collegiality, etc.

The sedevacantists think that real popes could not be responsible for such a crisis, and consequently they consider them not to be "real popes".

Could you briefly explain what the crisis in the Church consists of?

I will do this by quoting Fr. Gleize:

"That which speaks the most is all the speeches published in the Osservatore Romano that constantly reaffirm the principle of religious liberty, state secularism and ecumenism, a principle

that is in formal contradiction with the constant and unanimous teaching of the pontifical magisterium from before Vatican II. […]

"In the past, it was possible that some popes were not equal to their mission. They could fail to keep, at one time or another, their pastoral role, putting in more or less serious, more or less direct danger the unity of the faith in the Holy Church. But this attitude explains itself for essentially moral reasons. None of these popes were attached to error by intellectual conviction. They all fell short without a fundamentally intellectual adherence to error, and this came sometimes from a lack of courage in the middle of persecution, such as with Liberius, sometimes from a certain naiveté and an excess of mediation, as with Honorius and Vigilius, sometimes even from a sort of theological intemperance as with John XXII. The most serious attitude of all, that of Pope Honorius, warranted the *favens hæresim* censure. It did not cause this pope to be condemned as a formal heretic […]

"But in view of these isolated cases, the consistent attitude of all the popes since the Second Vatican Council has an entirely different appearance. The daily preaching of these sovereign pontiffs is constantly spotted with false principles of religious liberty, ecumenism and collegiality. These are grave errors, and they are the consequence of this "heresy of the 20th century," to use the expression of Madiran, the heresy of neo-modernism. Constant and repeated errors, from John XXIII and Paul VI to Benedict XVI, errors that are not the consequence of passing weakness or naiveté, but, on the contrary, are the expression of a fundamental adherence of the intelligence, the affirmation of an informed conviction. This is why such a situation is really and truly without precedent." – cf. Fr. Gleize, *Vu de Haut*14 (2008), p.95-96.

Do the sedevacantists agree amongst themselves?

No, far from it. To use the terms of a sedevacantist: the "sedevacantists" are scattered along at least six dividing lines:

- Total vacancy / formal vacancy and material permanence ("Cassiciacum Thesis");
- Acceptance of consecrations without apostolic mandate / refusal of these consecrations;
- Rejection out of the Church of all those who are not sedevacantists / refusal of such a rejection;
- Ecclesiastical laws keep their imperative force / the laws are stripped of executory force;
- Acceptance of the principle of a conclave outside of the Roman line / refusal of such a possibility;
- Vacancy of authority has lasted since the death of Pius XII / since *Pacem in terris* / since the death of John XXIII / since the proclamation of religious liberty (December 7, 1965) [and our sedevacantist forgot yet one more theory: since the replacement of Paul VI by a double].

This gives us, unless I am mistaken, 160 possibilities.

But that which is common among all sedevacantists is that they think that one must not pray for the pope in public.

Sedevacantist Arguments

On what arguments do sedevacantists base their theories?

They have *a priori* arguments and *a posteriori* arguments. *A priori*, they say, the pope being a heretic, he cannot be a true pope, which can be proven in a *theological* manner (a heretic cannot be the head of the Church, but John Paul II is a heretic, therefore…) or in a *legal* manner (Church laws invalidate the election of a heretic, but Cardinal Wojtyla – or Ratzinger – was a heretic at the time of his election, therefore …).

A priori, they say again, the current "pope" was consecrated bishop with the new episcopal consecration rite invented by Paul VI, so he is not a bishop. But to be Pope, one must be Bishop of Rome. Therefore …

A posteriori, they say finally, we note that the actions taken by the popes are bad or erroneous, while they should be covered by infallibility. Therefore, these popes are not really popes.

The Theological Argument of the Heresy of the Pope

But isn't it true that a pope who becomes a heretic loses the pontificate?

St. Robert Bellarmine says that a pope who *formally* and *manifestly* became a heretic would lose the pontificate. For that to apply to John Paul II, he would have to be a *formal* heretic, deliberately refusing the Church's magisterium; and this formal heresy would have to be *manifest* in the eyes of all. But though the popes since Paul VI, and especially John Paul II, make heretical affirmations or statements that lead to heresy rather often, it cannot easily be shown that they are aware of rejecting a dogma of the Church. And as long as there is no sure proof, then it is more prudent to refrain from judging. This was Archbishop Lefebvre's line of conduct.

If a Catholic were convinced that John Paul II is a formal, manifest heretic, should he then conclude that he is no longer pope?

No, he should not, because according to the "common" opinion (Suarez), or even the "more common" opinion (Billuart), theologians think that even a heretical pope can continue to exercise the papacy. For him to lose his jurisdiction, the Catholic bishops (the only judges in matters of faith besides the pope, by Divine will) would have to make a declaration denouncing the pope's heresy.

"According to the more common opinion, Christ, by a particular providence, for the common good and the tranquility of the Church, continues to give jurisdiction to an even manifestly heretical pontiff until such time as he should be *declared* a manifest heretic by the Church" (Billuart, *De Fide*, diss. V, a. III, § 3, obj. 2).

Now, in so serious a matter, it is not prudent to go against the common opinion.

But how can a heretic, who is no longer a member of the Church, be its leader or head?

Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange, basing his reasoning on Billuart, explains in his treatise *De Verbo Incarnato* (p. 232) that a heretical pope, while no longer a member of the Church, can still be her head. Indeed, what is impossible in the case of a *physical* head is possible (albeit abnormal) for a *secondary moral* head. "The reason is that – whereas a physical head cannot influence the members without receiving the vital influx of the soul – a moral head, as is the [Roman] Pontiff, can exercise jurisdiction over the Church even if he does not receive from the soul of the Church any influx of interior faith or charity."

In short, the pope is constituted a member of the Church by his personal faith, which he can lose, but he is head of the visible Church by jurisdiction and authority that can co-exist with heresy.

The Canonical Argument of the Heresy of the Pope

And what about their canonical argument?

The sedevacantists base their position on the apostolic constitution *Cum ex Apostolatus* of Pope Paul IV (1555-1559). But some good studies have shown that this constitution lost its legal force (even sedevacantist priests recognize it: "We cannot use the bull of Paul IV to prove that the Holy See is currently vacant, but only to prove *the possibility* that it can happen…" (Fr. F. Ricossa, *Solalitium* 36, May-June 1994, p. 57-58, note 1). That which remains valid in this constitution is its dogmatic aspect. And, consequently, it cannot be made to say more than the theological argument already examined.

Yet the code in the Gasparri edition (C.I.C. *cum fontium annotatione,* Romæ) refers in a note to the *Cum ex apostolatus* constitution.

These notes of the code in the Gasparri edition mention the sources of the code. But this does not mean that all of its sources are still in force!

The 1917 code says in Canon 6 (5°) that the punishments that are not mentioned in the code are abrogated. Now, the *Cum ex apostolatus* constitution was a penal law, because it inflicted the revocation of an ecclesiastical office, and the punishments that it prescribed were not picked up again in the code.

There is more: even before the new code, St. Pius X had already abrogated Paul IV's constitution by his consitition *Vacante sede apostolica* of December 25, 1904 (§ 29), which declares null any censure able to remove the active or passive voice from the cardinals of the conclave. And Canon 160 of the code declares that the election of the pope is regulated *only* by this constitution of St. Pius X.

The constitution of Pius XII of December 8, 1945, *Vacantis apostolicæ sedis*, which replaced that of St. Pius X, takes the same position on this subject: "No cardinal may be excluded in any way from the active and passive election of the sovereign pontiff, under no pretext nor for cause of excommunication, suspension, interdiction or other ecclesiastical impediment. We lift the effect of these censures for this type of election only, keeping them in force for everything else" (n. 34).

The Argument of the Nullity of the Pope's Episcopal Consecration

Some sedevacantists argue that the current pope was consecrated bishop with the new rite invented by Paul VI, a rite that they deem invalid; thus, Benedict XVI is not a bishop or pope.

The new ritual of episcopal consecration comes from a prayer found in *Apostolic Tradition*, a work apparently from St. Hippolytus and dating from the beginning of the third century. Even if this attribution is probably, it is not agreed upon by all; some think that it is an "anonymous compilation containing elements of different ages". As for St. Hippolytus, he is thought to have been an antipope for some time before reconciling with Pope St. Pontian at the moment of their common martyrdom (in 235). It is from that same work that Canon number 2 of the new mass issues.

Yet, this prayer of the consecration is taken up again with a few variations in two oriental rites, the Coptic rite used in Egypt and the Eastern Syrian rite, used notably by the Maronites. It was therefore adopted by post-conciliar reformers to manifest the unity between the traditions of the three great patriarchates: Rome, Alexandria, Antioch.

By reason of this closeness to two Catholic rites, it cannot be affirmed that Paul VI's prayer is invalid.

Isn't it true that the new rite of Paul VI is close to the Anglican rite that was declared invalid by Leo XIII?

It is true that the rite of Paul VI is close to the Anglican rite, but not to the rite condemned by Leo XIII. The Anglican and Episcopalian churches also introduced a new consecratory prayer, taken from St. Hippolytus, with the aim to have a rite acceptable to Catholics, after the condemnation of the Anglican ordinations by Leo XIII.

A Posteriori Arguments

Don't the sedevacantists claim to find a confirmation of their opinion in the errors of the Council and the harmful liturgical and canonical laws of the Conciliar Church?

Indeed, the sedevacantists think, in general, that the teaching of the Council should have been covered by the infallibility of the ordinary universal magisterium (OUM), and consequently should not contain any errors. But, since there are errors, for example, on religious liberty, they conclude that Paul VI had ceased to be pope at that moment.[1]

In reality, if one accepted this reasoning, then it would be necessary to say that the whole Catholic Church disappeared at that moment and that "the gates of hell had prevailed against her." against her. For the teaching of the ordinary, universal magisterium is that of all the bishops, of the whole teaching Church.

It is simpler to think that the teaching of the Council and of the Conciliar Church is not covered by the infallibility of the ordinary, universal magisterium for the reasons explained in the article on "the authority of the Council" that appeared in *Le Sel de la terre* 35 (winter 2000-2001).

Can you summarize the essential parts of this argument?

The *main* reason for which conciliar teaching on religious liberty (for example) is not covered by the OUM is that the conciliar magisterium does not present itself as teaching truths to be believed or held in a firm and definitive manner. Conciliar teaching no longer presents itself as "necessary for salvation" (this is logical, since those who profess it think that it is possible to be saved even without the Catholic Faith).

Since it is not imposed with authority, this teaching is not covered by infallibility. The same thing can be said of liturgical laws (the new mass; new canonizations…) and canonical laws (the new Canon Law…) set forth by these latest popes: they are not covered by infallibility, although normally they should have been.

The Cassiciacum Thesis

Can you explain what is meant by being pope "*materialiter*"?

The main difficulty of sedevacantism is to explain how the Church can continue to exist in a visible manner (for she has received from Our Lord the promise that she will endure until the end of the world) while being deprived of her head.

The partisans of the so-called "Cassiciacum Thesis" have come up with a subtle solution: the current pope was validly designated as pope, but he did not receive the papal authority because there was an obstacle in him (heresy). He is pope *materialiter*, but not *formaliter*.

Can you detail the arguments of this "thesis"?

Here are the arguments as summarized by a priest who professes them:

- The starting point is an induction: the acts of Paul VI (because it was he at that time who was reigning in Rome) contribute to the destruction of the Catholic religion and its replacement by the religion of man in the form of concealed Protestantism. From this comes the certitude that Paul VI does not have the usual intention of obtaining the good / end of the Church, which is Jesus Christ *plenum gratiæ et veritatis*.
- The usual intention of obtaining the good of the Church is a necessary condition (the ultimate disposition) for a subject elected pope to receive the communication of pontifical authority with makes him *to be with* Jesus Christ and hold the role of His Vicar on Earth.
- Consequently, Paul VI is devoid of all pontifical authority: he is not pope *formaliter*; he is not Vicar of Christ. In a word, he is not pope.[2]
- This necessitates the affirmation that if Paul VI is not pope *formaliter*, he yet remains pope *materialiter*, as a simple elected subject, seated on the Pontifical Seat, neither pope nor anti-pope.

Does this solution resolve the difficulties of "pure" sedevacantism?

It does not resolve the main difficulty of sedevacantism: how can the Church continue to be visible? For some proponents of "the thesis", there is no longer any hierarchy at all ("the nominations of cardinals and bishops are acts of pontifical jurisdiction, which is precisely absent and which nothing can replace"). For others, the pope *materialiter* has power (how?) to constitute a hierarchy *materialiter*. But such a hierarchy, devoid of its "form," is not the visible hierarchy of the Church (no more than the Orthodox hierarchy is the hierarchy of the Church). Moreover, this theory sets off new difficulties – at least for those who say that the pope *materialiter* has the power to constitute a hierarchy *materialiter* – because it implies that the pope *materialiter*, devoid of authority, still has enough authority to change the laws on papal election.

What do you think of the arguments upon which this solution is based?

This solution is not founded on Tradition. Theologians (Cajetan, St. Robert Bellarmine, John of St. Thomas, etc.) examined the possibility of a heretical pope, but no one, prior to the Council, ever imagined this theory of "the absence of the usual intention to obtain the good of the Church" that would form an "*obex*" (obstacle) to receiving the "being-with-Christ," the form of the papacy.

It plays on the ambiguity of the word "intention". Proponents of the thesis recognize that the intention must be in the person of the pope ("this intention is the *ultimate disposition of the subject* to receive communication of the pontifical authority"), but at the same time they affirm that it has nothing to do with the *personal* intention of the pope. We can agree with them when they say that recent popes harm the common good of the Church – and that is precisely what created the state of necessity – but it remains to be proven that such is truly the *personal* intention of the popes, and then that such an intention deprives them of authority.

The "Una Cum" Question

Aren't the sedevacantists right to refuse to name the pope at Mass in order to show that they are not in communion with ("*una cum*") a heretic (at least materially) and his heresies?

The expression "*una cum*" in the Canon of the Mass does not mean that one affirms that he is "in communion" with the person of the pope and his erroneous ideas, but rather that one wants to pray for the Church "and for" the pope.

In order to be sure of this interpretation, in addition to reading the erudite studies that have been made on this point, it is enough to read the rubric of the missal for the case of a bishop celebrating Mass. In this case, the bishop must pray for the Church "*una cum […] me indigno servo tuo*," which does not mean that he prays "*in communion with* myself, your unworthy servant" (which does not make sense!), but that he prays "*and for* myself, your unworthy servant."

What does St. Thomas Aquinas think of this?

St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*, when he comments on the prayers of the Mass (III, Q. 83, A. 4, *corpus*) equates "*una cum*" with the expression "*et pro*": then the priest commemorates in silence [it is the beginning of the Canon] first those for whom the sacrifice is offered, that is [it is offered] for the Universal Church, *and for "those who constitute it in dignity"* [the pope, the bishop, the king]; then particular some who offer or for whom this sacrifice is offered [the *memento* of the living].

But doesn't St. Thomas Aquinas say that in the Canon one should not pray for heretics?

St. Thomas Aquinas does not prohibit praying for heretics, but merely observes that, in the prayers of the Canon of the Mass, one prays for those whose faith and devotion are known to and tested by the Lord (*quorum tibi fides cognita est et nota devotio*) (III, Q. 79, A. 7, ad 2). For, he says, in order for this sacrifice to obtain its effect (*effectum habet*), those for whom one prays must be "united to the passion of Christ by faith and charity." But he does not forbid praying for a non-Catholic. He only means that this prayer will not have the same efficacy as one for a Catholic, and is not provided for in the Canon.

All that can be concluded from this affirmation of St. Thomas is that, if the pope is a heretic (which remains to be proven), then the prayer for him will not have the foreseen effect, "*non habet effectum*".

What final reflection can be taken from these discussions?

It is not suitable to declare that "the Pope is not pope" (materially or formally) in the name of a "theological opinion". On this subject, we refer to an interesting article by Fr. Hurtaud that appeared in the *Revue Thomiste*. The author shows that Savonarole thought that Alexander VI had been elected with simony and, for this reason, he was not pope. However, as the invalidity of a "simonous" election was only an opinion, Savonarole asked for the convocation of a council where he brought proof that Alexander VI no longer had the Catholic Faith, and it is in this way that it was certified that Alexander VI had lost supreme jurisdiction.

In conclusion, what should we think of sedevacantism?

It is a position that has not been proven speculatively, and it is imprudent to hold it practically (imprudence that can have very serious consequences – think, notably, of people who deprive themselves of the sacraments on the pretext that they cannot find a priest who has the same "opinion" as they do). That is why Archbishop Lefebvre never entered onto this path, and he even forbade the priests of his Society to profess sedevacantism. We should trust in his prudence and theological sense.

Translated from the original French article (online: http://www.dominicainsavrille.fr/les-dominicains-davrille-sont-ils-devenus-sedevacantistes*).* *You are welcome to republish this translation. Please mention both the original source and the source of this translation: http://filiimariae.over-blog.com.*

[1] Argument of Fr. B.: 1. The Universal Magisterium of the Roman Pontiff, alone or with the bishops united to him in the council, is infallible. – 2. Now, Paul VI, alone and in the council, exercised such a magisterium by all appearances; John Paul II, who carries on the work, also. – 3. By all appearances, their teaching is therefore infallible. – 4. Now, a contradiction exists between the content of that which they teach or prescribe for the Universal Church, and the doctrine defined before in an irreformable manner. – 5. Given that proposal 1 is of faith, the conclusion is forced: the teaching of Vatican II promulgated and applied by Paul VI and confirmed by John Paul II is not the teaching of the Church, and neither Paul VI nor John Paul II can be recognized as popes.

[2] His acts are therefore devoid of all authority, magisterial as well as canonical; as a result, it can be seen how it is not impossible that the acts of Paul VI are contrary to the Catholic Faith and incompatible with pontifical authority, and that to affirm it is not on any way denying the prerogatives of a pope, in particular his infallibility and his universal and immediate jurisdiction. – However, this proof says nothing about the person of Paul VI, because the intention that is denied him is not his personal intention (*finis operantis*, which remains out of the picture) but the objective intention that is usually imminent to his actions (*finis operis*). It therefore does not allow it to be affirmed that Paul VI is personally outside the Catholic Church for reason of a sin of heresy or schism (note from the defender of the “thesis”).